Edward Wheatley , Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability
Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability by Edward Wheatley
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BOOK REVIEW

Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability. *Edward Wheatley*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. Pp. xiii+ 284.

Edward Wheatley's historical survey of blindness opens with the account of an "entertainment" that took place in Paris in 1425. Located in a park, this "amusement" was performed by four blind men and a pig, which the former would obtain if they managed to kill the animal with the sticks given to them. This expensive and carefully planned event was staged for the enjoyment of the sighted, who rejoiced in observing the blind men giving each other great blows, thereby inflicting more injuries on each other than they actually gave to the pig.

As Wheatley's book makes clear, the cruel attitude toward the blind demonstrated by this event is especially characteristic of the general attitude toward blind people in medieval France. By comparing cultural constructions of blindness in France and England over some two hundred years, Wheatley arrives at the surprising conclusion that the reactions to visual impairment displayed in these two countries differed considerably. His comparative approach to the religious and social practices that shaped medieval attitudes to blindness thus proves very rewarding and will be highly useful for scholars dealing both with social history and with the theoretical aspects of vision in this period.

In the introductory chapter, "Cripping the Middle Ages, Medievalizing Disability Theory," Wheatley delineates the theoretical approach he adopts in this book. As the title of this chapter suggests, disability theory is paramount to the consideration of medieval religious, literary, and artistic representations of blindness pursued by the author. However, because the field of disability studies has tended to focus on the present and rather

recent history, he acknowledges the need for scholars of the past to adapt that theory, historicizing it for the scope of his study.

Drawing on the distinction between disability and impairment often made in disability studies, Wheatley delineates a fundamental divergence in the construction of blindness on both sides of the Channel in chapter 2. In spite of the conjoint adherence to a religious model of blindness in both France and England, different attitudes toward the blind appear in "France's multivalent engagement with the disability and England's relatively benign neglect of it" (4). The rich panoply of words for blindness found in the French lexicon, compared with the rather scarce range in the English one, and the cruel and satirical treatment of blind characters in French literature, compared with a much kinder treatment in English texts, are but two examples of the remarkable variety of responses developed in both countries. According to Wheatley, this difference in attitudes toward the visually impaired both reflected and shaped the different social constructions of blindness adopted on either side of the Channel, which led to differences in the treatment of the blind as human beings. For example, whereas the French made frequent use of blinding as punishment, the English reverted to this practice to a much lesser extent. In France, moreover, the blind could seek refuge in royally protected hospices that were dedicated exclusively to their care, whereas in England, no such institutions existed. Wheatley argues that the greater attention paid to blind people in France made blindness more conspicuous there, resulting in a local commodification of sight. According to the author, in England, the lesser prominence or absence of the institutions and practices mentioned above "precluded the commodification of sight, leaving blindness within the realm of divine will rather than human negotiation" (ix).

In chapter 3, Wheatley examines how, in both France and England, the visually impaired who lacked the protection of a king, a community, or a family were controlled and marginalized as the result of bitter prejudices against them. The stereotypes ascribed to blind people, such as greed, laziness, and sexual excess, were extended to the Jews, who were considered metaphorically "blind" because of their refusal to "see" the divinity of Christ. Here, it would have been worthwhile for the author to address the fundamental association between sight and cognition underlying this analogy, which would have been useful in contextualizing the metaphorical "blindness" ascribed to the Jews. Also, owing to the impact of the religious approach to blindness in the Middle Ages, delineating the tight connection between epistemological concerns and sexual transgression associated with the original sin would have further elucidated some of the characteristics attributed to the visually impaired during that era.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to intentionally humorous, satirical representations of the blind in literature, nearly all of which are Continental. The

genres examined here include ballads, fabliaux, farces, and a romance. While the early farce *Le Garçon et l'Aveugle* (mid-thirteenth century) attests to the excesses associated with blindness discussed previously, Wheatley's comparison of the fourteenth-century French prose romance *Bérinus* with its fifteenth-century English translation, *The Tale of Beryn*, allows him to show how differing constructions of blindness in France and England were accompanied by different developments in the literary field.

While satire pertaining to the blind seems to be widely absent from English texts, accounts of gods or other supernatural figures blinding characters for sexual sin seem to be missing almost entirely in French literature. Literary representations of this type of punishment, featured in works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's Merchant's Tale and Man of Law's Tale (which are part of the *Canterbury Tales*, begun by Chaucer in 1387), Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* (early fifteenth century), and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (fifteenth century) are considered in chapter 5. The preponderance of this motif in the English textual tradition may result from the dominance of the religious model of disability there.

Chapter 6 examines miraculous blindings and the curing of the blind in hagiographic literature. Interestingly, hagiographic accounts of blinding as punishment seem to be more frequent in the French than in the English tradition. However, after the Norman Conquest of England, occurrences of blinding increased in the latter as hagiographies of English saints were rewritten under the aegis of the Norman clergy. According to Wheatley, this shift is indicative of the French predilection for blinding as a punitive practice, which was only brought to England during the Norman period. The final chapter is devoted to medical treatments for blindness and the reactions of blind historical figures to such treatments. This chapter is particularly revealing, as it shows how blind people perceived themselves in medieval Europe. Medical intervention seems only to have been sought if remission for the sin that was believed to have caused the blindness seemed attainable.

Wheatley has given us an exceptionally rich book that might serve as a model for multidisciplinary work. It would surely be rewarding if this pioneering historical survey were to be complemented by similar studies devoted to the construction of other disabilities during this era, giving us the opportunity to understand the specific associations and cultural implications of different physical impairments.

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